

Every Child A Graduate

The Literacy Coach

A Key to Improving Teaching and Learning in Secondary Schools



ALLIANCE FOR
EXCELLENT EDUCATION

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Elizabeth G. Sturtevant



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About the Alliance for Excellent Education

The Alliance for Excellent Education is a national policy, advocacy, and research organization created to help middle and high school students receive an excellent education.

The Alliance focuses on America's six million most at-risk secondary school students—those in the lowest achievement quartile—who are likely to leave school without a diploma or to graduate unprepared for a productive future. Based in Washington, D.C., we work to make it possible for these students to achieve high standards and graduate prepared for college and success in life.

Our audience includes parents, teachers, and students, as well as the federal, state, and local policy communities, education organizations, the media, and a concerned public.

To inform the national debate about education policies and options, we produce reports and other materials, make presentations at meetings and conferences, brief policymakers and the press, and provide timely information to a wide audience via our bi-weekly newsletter and regularly updated web site, www.all4ed.org.

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Executive Summary

Never in this country's history has the need for an educated, literate citizenry been so critical. The increasing complexity of rapid globalization demands a workforce that is skilled in reading, communications, and mathematics. The ability to maintain a growing economy depends on the availability of educated, productive workers. A democratic society requires knowledgeable and involved citizens.

However, the nation has a problem. Far too many of its young people are struggling to read at a level that will allow them to excel in school and their future workplace. In fact, the most recent National Assessment for Education Progress exams revealed that a quarter of our eighth graders are reading at "below basic" levels. These students have little chance of succeeding in the demanding courses of high school without interventions that will considerably increase their ability to comprehend complex material, increase their vocabularies, and develop strong study skills.

We know that it is possible to teach all of our middle and high school students to read and comprehend demanding texts and other informational resources. Instructional methods developed during the second half of the twentieth century are still widely advocated today. Overall, content teachers and secondary literacy educators recommend that teachers in all core content areas (English, history, mathematics, science, etc.) develop the types of learning environments in which students are expected to use reading, writing, and discussion to solve problems, conduct research, experiment, and learn in the content area.

A curriculum to support secondary learning and literacy cannot be a rigid, one-size-fits-all program. Teachers and teams of teachers must be able to make professional, informed decisions based on their own students' needs and ability levels, in relation to curricular requirements and context. To do this, teachers must be guided and supported in a continuous learning process about effective ways to combine their teaching of literacy and content in the secondary school environment.

Throughout the nation, many secondary schools and school districts are beginning to implement valuable programs designed to improve adolescent literacy. These programs recognize that effective, continuing, and supportive staff development—for teachers, administrators, and key district-level personnel—is critical to success. Key players in the change process are *literacy coaches*—master teachers who provide essential leadership for the school's overall literacy program. This leadership includes helping to create and supervising a long-term staff development program that supports both the development and implementation of the literacy program over months and years.

Literacy coaches may work directly with students who have particular difficulties in reading and comprehension, but their major role is to work with content teachers across the curriculum to help them implement and utilize strategies designed to improve their students' ability to read, write, and succeed in content courses.

Coaches may organize literacy leadership teams that review assessment data and develop literacy goals for their schools, attend meetings and professional development sessions and bring information and ideas for curriculum revision back to their school colleagues, and conduct or facilitate in-service training for those colleagues. Because they are incorporated into the school's process for

improvement and change, coaches meet with teacher teams and individual teachers on an ongoing basis after training sessions are completed; they review student assessment data, guide lesson planning, and generally ensure that the strategies learned in workshops are effectively used in classroom instruction.

Coaches assist teachers in overcoming problems that arise in the process of choosing appropriate teaching strategies and combining literacy instruction with content area curriculum requirements, helping them work through ways to meet objectives in a manner consistent with their own teaching styles and the school context. Additionally, coaches provide an essential link between teachers within a department, between departments, and to school administrators, and help to resolve problems and conflicts before they become insurmountable. They also may work closely with new teachers and administrators, helping them to understand the school's literacy program and their role in it.

Overall, the literacy coaching role is highly collaborative. Successful coaches are viewed by teachers as advisor/mentors who understand their goals, frustrations, and visions, and who facilitate their ability to help students achieve at high levels.

Schools, school districts, and state educational agencies across the nation are developing programs to improve adolescent literacy in our middle schools and high schools. Many of these programs consider the literacy coach to be an integral part of their structure and success. Although more research and evaluation on the effectiveness of these programs is needed, early results and anecdotal evidence is encouraging and indicates positive achievement in the most important measure—that of increasing students' literacy levels.

However, the numbers of programs currently in operation that involve the placement of literacy coaches in secondary schools are relatively small. If these were expanded across the nation to serve all secondary schools—or even those with the most serious literacy needs—the demand for coaches would be overwhelming. The Alliance for Excellent Education estimates that, to meet the needs of the more than nine million fourth through twelfth graders who read at “below basic” levels, approximately 10,000 literacy coaches will be needed (assuming a ratio of one coach to every twenty classroom teachers).

Different, but equally effective, pathways have been developed by different literacy programs to train teachers to become literacy coaches. To meet a national need for coaches over the next several years, multiple training pathways will obviously be needed. Among the models currently proving effective are college or university programs that offer training which leads to a master's degree or reading specialist certification; certification programs offered by states or accrediting agencies; and collaborations between school districts and colleges in which teachers receive preparation both in college classrooms and in field-based sites.

The introduction of literacy initiatives in schools and school districts that integrate coaches as a key component of their programming has proven successful across the country—in specific, but limited, programs. For the sake of the young people of our country who are most at risk of dropping out of high school or not going on to college because of their limited reading and comprehension ability, and because their success or failure has such an impact on the nation's economic and social future,

we must now expand these programs into schools nationally. To do so will require an understanding of what works in successful programs, and how to train effective coaches. This paper attempts to define those issues.

Introduction

Many American adults remember middle and high schools as places where teachers lectured absolutely endlessly—or, at least, for forty-two minutes. Students listened, took notes, and suffered through pop quizzes and multiple-choice tests. Occasionally, the teacher might ask a question. There was always a “right” answer, and success was dependent on how well the student could guess or remember yesterday’s lecture.

Large, heavy textbooks were an integral part of the classroom experience. Reading assignments, however, were generally regarded by students as challenges to skim for facts that would allow them to get the “end of chapter” questions answered quickly. Writing was a skill developed for the purpose of answering essay questions on tests. Technology was limited to chewed pencils, slide rules, or calculators, depending on the decade.

What American Adolescents Need

While this type of secondary education got at least a portion of previous generations of Americans successfully through high school and into college or the working world, it is not as useful for building the types of knowledge and skills that are needed today.

The diverse young people attending American secondary schools at the beginning of the twenty-first century need a much more comprehensive education than was acquired by any previous generation. This education must include development of a strong base of knowledge across many content domains as well as advanced skills in reading and communicating with and through multiple types of texts and technologies.

The summer 2000 issue of *Occupational Outlook Quarterly*, a publication of the Bureau of Labor Statistics, points out that

Although most of the fastest growing jobs [between 1998 and 2008] will require a college degree, the majority of new jobs being created—from home health aides to desktop publishers—require knowledge other than that gained from earning a degree. For workers in these jobs, good basic reading, communication, and mathematics skills play an important role in getting a job and developing a career.

A 1996 American Management Association survey of mid-size and larger businesses found that 19 percent of job applicants taking employer administered tests lacked the math and reading skills necessary for the jobs they were applying for. That percentage increased to almost 36 percent in 1998. The report attributed the sharp increase in the deficiency rate to the higher literacy and math skills required in today’s workplace.

Critical thinking skills

Instruction in American secondary schools traditionally has focused on developing students’ content knowledge, emphasizing the memorization of facts. Higher-order thinking and reasoning, as well as development of reading and communication abilities, are given very limited attention in this type of instruction (Goodlad, 1984).

Instruction that helps students build a depth of content knowledge and the ability to think critically about complex problems involves substantial interaction among teachers, learners, and text materials (including traditional materials such as books and newspapers, and information available technologically). Students cannot learn the skills they need by sitting passively and listening to their teachers lecture. They cannot learn to read critically by skimming textbooks for right answers. Students must engage in thoughtful reading, writing, problem solving, and discussion in all of their classes (Dillon, O'Brien, Wellinski, Springs, and Smith, 1996).

Language-rich learning environment

Within this environment, teachers also must provide opportunities for students to complete structured observations, research, and experimentation. They must teach students strategies for effective learning (e.g., Bulgren, Lenz, Marquis, Schumaker, and Deshler, 2002). Throughout these experiences, students can be encouraged to use language for learning in ways that are very similar to the ways that professionals use language in their work. For example, in history class, students can construct and analyze first-person accounts of events the way a historian would; in science class, students can make notes from their observations as a scientist would.

Such a language-rich learning environment is appropriate for all students in secondary schools, whatever their level of previous achievement, ability or disability, or proficiency in communicating fluently in English (e.g., Ovando and Collier, 1998). However, to make this type of instruction effective, middle and high school teachers need to know and use specific teaching methods that help students successfully complete the reading, writing, and communication activities suggested above. They need to know how to help their students achieve content literacy, or the ability to use reading and writing effectively for content learning (Vacca and Vacca, 2002).

Highly qualified teachers

It is important to understand that whether middle and high school students are in an advanced or a very basic class, they need classroom teachers who will assist them in developing their literacy abilities to the next step. Even high school seniors in advanced placement classes benefit from having teachers who help them to understand difficult vocabulary and develop enhanced study skills. Struggling readers and writers especially need highly competent classroom teachers who can guide them through important content material (Brozo and Simpson, 2003). They also need additional assistance from teachers who have special training in reading if they are to develop higher levels of comprehension, fluency, and vocabulary knowledge.

Unfortunately, the majority of secondary schools today do not provide either systematic literacy instruction in content area classrooms or extra support for struggling readers.

Foundation for Change

We know that it is possible to better teach all of our middle and high school students—particularly those who are the most in need of help—to read and comprehend complex materials. As we build programs and formulate strategies to achieve that goal today, we should make sure that we take into account past national experiences.

Currently, the majority of secondary schools and teachers do not implement curricula that adequately support adolescent students' literacy development. However, the idea of providing literacy instruction for secondary students is not a new one.

As early as the 1920s, reading educators advocated that secondary content teachers teach students to comprehend their content texts (Moore, Readence, and Rickelman, 1983). Educators of that time found that many children had difficulty transitioning from the children's stories that were used in the early grades to more difficult content area textbooks in secondary schools. Secondary school content area teachers were seen as being in a unique position to provide reading assistance in combination with advanced course content (McCallister, 1930).

For much of the remainder of the twentieth century, literacy educators pushed for an increased emphasis on reading and study skills instruction in the upper elementary grades through high school. Although there were not many studies of secondary teachers' actual reading practices before the 1980s, there is some evidence that, unfortunately, few teachers or school administrators heeded these calls. For example, Barry (1997), in a historical comparison of principals' reports on high school reading programs in the 1990s versus those in the 1940s, notes that while in both time periods secondary teachers were encouraged by university professors to be "teachers of reading," neither group had the additional "time, money, training or support to do so" (p. 530).

Despite the apparent disconnects between their recommendations and actual school practices, literacy educators continued to advocate for an increased emphasis on reading and study skills instruction in the upper elementary grades through high school. Then, in the 1970s and 1980s, research in this area took a major step forward, as researchers at major universities obtained federal funds to develop and validate reading strategies appropriate for content area classrooms (Alvermann and Moore, 1991). In addition, related textbooks and professional development materials became widely available. Some of these textbooks, in new editions, are still used extensively in university classes and school-district in-service programs for secondary teachers (e.g., Vacca and Vacca, 2002).

By the mid-1980s most states required that beginning middle and high school teachers take a course in content area reading for certification (Farrell and Cirrincione, 1986). During approximately the same time period, reading specialists, or teachers with special certification in reading, worked in junior highs and high schools across the United States. Many of these reading specialists were funded through federal projects.

A recent retrospective study of these early secondary reading specialists reveals that many worked with students who needed special assistance; some also provided advice and support for content teachers who wished to help their students in reading (Anders, 2002). Many secondary reading

specialists also provided in-service training for groups of teachers, supervised literacy assessment programs, and worked with volunteers and aides who tutored individual students. The effectiveness of reading specialists from this time period has not been studied on any wide basis, partly because there were so few reading specialists at the secondary level. In addition, anecdotal evidence indicates that in the few districts where secondary reading specialists existed, in most cases even very large schools only had one reading specialist. Thus measurement of effectiveness on a wide-scale basis would have been impossible.

The increasing scarcity of funding of the late 1980s and 1990s led to the downsizing or elimination of reading specialist positions in many states (Vogt and Shearer, 2003).

Effective Literacy Strategies

Many of the teaching methods developed during the last half of the twentieth century that were designed to increase literacy levels in adolescents are still widely advocated today. Overall, content educators in a wide variety of disciplines *and* secondary literacy educators recommend that teachers develop the types of learning environments in which students are expected to use reading, writing, and discussion to solve problems, conduct research, experiment, and learn in a particular content area (Alvermann, Boyd, Brozo, Hinchman, Moore, and Sturtevant, 2002).

Evidence strongly points to significant benefits to students when teachers provide specific instruction before, during, and after students read, as happens in this kind of learning environment. The process helps students link new ideas to what they learned previously, remember what was read, and think critically. For example, Anticipation Guides (Readence, Bean, and Baldwin, 1995), a teacher-designed tool consisting of a series of statements that students respond to and discuss, can help students think about a topic before they read new information. A strategy known as KWL (Ogle, 1986) can be effective in helping students link what they already know (K) with what they want (W) to learn (before reading or studying) and what they actually learned (L) (after reading). A Discussion Web (Alvermann, 1991) is a graphic aid that guides whole-class discussion after students have read about a controversial topic.

Teachers can also teach their students to use effective reading and studying strategies for out-of-class assignments. For example, study guides, such as Selective Reading Guides (Cunningham and Shablak, 1975), can be used to direct struggling readers to the important ideas in a lengthy reading selection. This can be beneficial, particularly in content area courses, since students learn to *read for information* by skimming some parts of text and thoroughly reading others depending on their purpose for reading. Three Level Guides can help all students answer questions at different levels of difficulty since they prompt students to look at text for the literal, interpretive, and applied meanings (Herber, 1978). Various other note-taking strategies have also been developed for use with reading, listening, or observations.

These strategies are examples of literally dozens of similar methods that teachers can use and adapt to their own instructional needs (Tierney, Readence, and Dishner, 1995). The overall purpose of these literacy strategies is to enable students to learn to engage fully in the concepts authors present in text material, link new concepts to their previous knowledge to improve memory and understanding, and think critically.

Today, therefore, schools and teachers have the ability to base their instructional and curricular decisions on years of research related to the types of learning environments and day-to-day teaching strategies that best support students' growth in reading, writing, and critical thinking. Schools and teachers can make a real difference in the lives of the adolescents with whom they work. The current challenge is to make this goal a reality in middle and high schools throughout the United States.

It is important to understand that a curriculum to support secondary learning and literacy cannot be a rigid, one-size-fits-all program. Rather, teachers and teams of teachers must make professional, informed decisions based on their own students' needs and current ability levels, as well as curricular requirements and context. To do this, teachers must be guided and supported in a continuous learning process about effective ways to combine their teaching of literacy and content in the secondary school environment.

Why Change Is Difficult

Despite all that is now known about how to provide effective content and literacy instruction for adolescents, studies report that traditional secondary school instruction is extremely resistant to change (Cuban, 1993). Students today are likely to find themselves immersed in the same types of lectures, tests, and assignments that their parents and grandparents experienced in earlier generations. The overall reading achievement of adolescents is not keeping pace with the increasing demands of a technological society (Alvermann et al., 2002), and in high-poverty middle and high schools, students continue to read two to three years behind grade level (U.S. Department of Education, March 2002).

Studies exploring reasons for the lack of implementation of research-based instructional practices in secondary schools have uncovered a host of roadblocks that frustrate educators in their efforts toward curricular improvement. These include structural and contextual constraints within schools, including

- lack of time;
- large class sizes;
- the total numbers of students and classes taught by an individual teacher;
- the traditional secondary school curriculum;
- high-stakes assessments; and
- teachers' and administrators' long-held instructional knowledge and beliefs.

Lack of funding for professional development is another serious barrier. The interaction of these constraints often results in a constant juggling act for teachers and others who wish to make changes, as they struggle to balance competing demands.

Secondary school institutional structures

Within most middle and high schools, the day is fast paced and personal attention is difficult to come by. Class sizes are large, usually well over twenty. Teachers are responsible for 125 to 150 students a day. Students take from six to eight classes, from different teachers. Class time is often limited to forty-five minutes or an hour. Instruction within this type of factory-model environment is not compatible with many of the content literacy instructional strategies known to improve students' content learning and reading and writing abilities (O'Brien et al., 1995). For effective, in-depth content and literacy learning, students need time to read thoughtfully, write, participate in discussions, make observations, and experiment. Teachers need time to assess students' needs, answer individual questions, and troubleshoot learning difficulties.

The secondary school curriculum

The fast-paced secondary school environment is accompanied by a fast-paced curriculum. Within this context, lecture-style instruction accomplishes important purposes. It is an efficient method for allowing teachers to convey the large quantity of factual information often required by district and state guidelines. Teachers of history, for example, are frequently required to cover "all" of U.S. history in one year. This leaves little time for thoughtful study or critical thinking about important events or concepts. Lecture-style instruction also fits with teachers' responsibility to manage their large groups of students in an orderly fashion.

High-stakes assessments

Throughout the United States, assessments of students are becoming more "high stakes." Tests are often linked to graduation, promotion, and individual course requirements. According to a 2003 report released by the Center on Education Policy, nineteen states currently have mandatory state exit exams—tests that students must pass to receive a high school diploma—and five more states plan to phase them in by 2008. Many more states have developed tests that emphasize the memorization of large amounts of factual information by the end of each high school course or at specified grade levels (for example, the Virginia Standards of Learning Tests). While statewide tests may assure policymakers and communities that teachers in different regions are covering the same material, they also can have the unintended—yet serious—consequence of subverting the curriculum in ways that substantially lessen the amounts of thoughtful reading and writing that students are asked to complete (White, Sturtevant, and Dunlap, 2003). Recent policy initiatives on the federal level, with the enactment of the No Child Left Behind legislation, have increased the frequency and high-stakes nature of testing.

Educators' knowledge

In many school districts, professional development and continuing education programs for teachers and administrators are very weak. While many experts agree that "extensive staff development [is] necessary to improve instruction" (Gallagher, 2002), professional development programs are often the first thing to be cut when budgets are tight. In Alabama, for instance, according to the *Tuscaloosa News*, the "overall loss of about \$80 million in funding statewide for K–12 schools (in 2003–2004) . . . will be felt in the areas of professional development, technology and textbooks" (Ricks, 2003).

This trend is particularly troubling because secondary teachers in the majority of states take, at most, only one course related to teaching reading or literacy during their preservice training (Farrell and Cirrincione, 1986). In addition, a gap of at least a year usually occurs between the content literacy course and the new teacher's opportunity to implement strategies on his or her own. Implementing a teaching strategy in a high school classroom which was learned a year or more before in a university environment may be akin to trying to ride a bicycle on a busy city street when one's only knowledge of bicycle riding comes from watching another person ride sometime in the past. Even though teacher educators use a variety of methods to provide their preservice teachers with practice in real situations, follow-up for the beginning teacher is essential.

Educators' long-held beliefs and attitudes

Compounding the problem is that many content area teachers do not believe that they should include literacy-related strategies in their repertoire of teaching practices. Beginning content teachers have rarely, if ever, seen any of their own secondary school teachers use these strategies, because literacy-related strategies are not the predominant practice in the secondary school environment. At the preservice level, new teachers may resist taking a content reading course, because they think it does not apply to their discipline (Stewart and O'Brien, 1989). Further, when these new teachers enter their first teaching jobs, they are likely to find other teachers in their disciplinary area who share their resistance.

It is an unfortunate fact that misunderstandings about the role of literacy in the content areas are common among practicing teachers. Some teachers believe that teaching literacy takes essential time away from the teaching of important concepts in their content disciplines. A few also believe that teaching reading is the province only of reading (or perhaps English) teachers, rather than a responsibility of all teachers.

Effective professional development programs can alleviate these misunderstandings by building essential knowledge among teachers about the important role all teachers have in helping students develop reading and communication skills in middle and high school. In addition, professional developers can help teachers understand that their students can develop content knowledge *at the same time that they are improving in literacy*. Administrators also need to be included in these discussions, since they may share misunderstandings and are needed to support the literacy program of the school.

Professional development programs also need to provide continuing support for teachers at the school site, providing teachers with assistance in implementing new methods. Even content teachers who have fully accepted the concept that helping students develop better reading and communication skills is their responsibility may have only a very limited idea about how to put this type of instruction into practice. For example, a veteran eleventh-grade history teacher in a case study project confided that, while he had learned several strategies that he would like to use to help his students understand their reading assignments better, he felt a "lack of confidence" in getting started, and was not sure how to fit the new teaching methods into his curriculum. The school later hired a literacy coach who helped this teacher make positive changes (Sturtevant, 1996).

The Literacy Specialist as Coach

Across the United States, many school districts are beginning to implement valuable programs designed to improve adolescent literacy. These initiatives are noted for their recognition that effective, continuing, and supportive staff development is critical to success. Nor should professional development be limited to teachers. Administrators and other key district-level personnel who have responsibility for the school's academic program need these kinds of supports, as well. Effective change that will truly improve every student's literacy and content learning requires strong support at all levels of school leadership.

Key players in the change process are *literacy coaches*—master teachers who provide essential leadership for the school's entire literacy program. This leadership includes helping to create and supervising a long-term staff development process that supports both the development and implementation of the literacy program over months and years.

Lead literacy teams

To begin the process, coaches often organize literacy leadership teams (e.g., Anders, 1999) that review assessment data and develop literacy plans for their schools. Coaches also attend meetings and professional development sessions at the district or state level, and bring information and ideas for curriculum revision back to their school colleagues.

Schools often begin the school-based staff development with in-service days or summer workshops. This is, of course, typical of procedures that have been in place in schools across the nation for many years. The *difference* is significant, however, for schools that have incorporated literacy coaches into the process. In these structures, coaches meet after the training session is over with teacher teams and individual teachers on an ongoing basis. They review student assessment data, guide lesson planning, and generally ensure that the literacy strategies learned in the workshops are used effectively in classroom instruction.

Guide teachers in using appropriate strategies

Coaches also assist teachers in overcoming the problems they undoubtedly will experience in choosing appropriate teaching strategies and combining literacy instruction with content area curriculum requirements. Although educators universally share certain goals—that students learn to read and comprehend their texts, understand essential vocabulary, and grow in both their literacy and their content knowledge—even the best-intentioned teachers need to work through ways to meet these objectives that fit within their own teaching styles and the school context. The coach plays a critical role in facilitating that process.

Liaise with teachers and administrators

In addition, coaches provide an essential link between teachers within a department and across departments, and to school administrators. The coach can help all educators within a school brainstorm solutions to problems and resolve issues before they grow to insurmountable levels. They also can work closely with new teachers or administrators, helping them to understand the

school's literacy program and their role in it. Overall, the coaching role is highly collaborative. Successful coaches must be viewed by teachers as advisors/mentors who understand their goals, frustrations, and visions—not as supervisors who evaluate their performance.

Supervisory and management responsibility, in most programs, belongs to the school administrators. The importance of including these school leaders in the development of and dialog about literacy improvement in their schools cannot be overemphasized. Administrators must know what changes are being asked of the teachers, and why. They must be a part of the process, approving programs and providing the necessary support to bring changes to fruition. This support could encompass a variety of actions, including finding the resources needed to obtain new materials, modifying time schedules, and approving interdisciplinary courses. It could go as far as making changes in the hiring process or teaching assignments.

The position of *literacy coach* is, in many ways, similar to that of the 1970s and early 1980s secondary school reading specialist who worked in federally funded projects in low-income schools across the United States. Like these earlier counterparts, the twenty-first-century literacy coach must be highly knowledgeable in reading and literacy. Most states already have certification processes in place for reading specialists; these processes are appropriate models for helping to define the skills and knowledge that secondary school literacy coaches need.

Be regarded as expert teachers

In addition to the necessary expertise in reading and literacy, secondary school literacy coaches must be highly regarded by content area teachers. They must have an intimate knowledge of the secondary school culture and student, as well as an understanding of the stresses and dilemmas of the secondary content teacher. With these criteria in mind, many schools specifically seek current, experienced secondary teachers and then provide them with incentives and support to gain the knowledge they need in literacy to provide coaching to their school colleagues. As part of their extensive and ongoing training, coaches also need to develop the skills necessary to effectively collaborate with adults on a professional basis. Selection of the right individuals with the appropriate knowledge base is essential to the success of this model.

Example Job Posting:

WANTED LITERACY COACH/CONSULTANT

Job responsibilities:

Collaborate with teachers to develop curriculum and effective instructional approaches in literacy and literacy in the content areas. Provide professional development for teachers, particularly in the areas of literacy across the curriculum. Model literacy strategies in content area classrooms. Help middle and high school faculty create individual teacher and school-based professional development plans. Support school administrators and teachers to develop and use a school-wide literacy plan.

Qualifications:

Experience teaching diverse learners at the middle or high school level. Knowledgeable about adolescents' literacy development, high school literacy curriculum and instruction, and balanced literacy approaches. Experience providing professional development and working in small-group facilitation. Excellent interpersonal skills. Must hold or be working toward state certification as a literacy professional.

Program Examples

Schools, school districts, and state educational agencies across the nation are developing programs to improve adolescent literacy. Many of these efforts include literacy coaches as an integral part of the improvement to teaching and learning. Additionally, these programs have several other commonalities that are important to note.

Similarities in approaches to coaching

1. Coaching is seen as part of a larger system of professional development and support for teachers and the school community as a whole. The literacy coach is integrated into this system, with intensive training for the coaches as well as for teachers and school administrators.
2. Selection of coaches takes into account the knowledge and skills needed, and the ease with which the coach will be able to establish respect and trust in the school. Often, ideal candidates are respected teachers within the school who have agreed to take substantial time to obtain certification from their state as a reading specialist, as well as training on coaching with middle and high school teachers. In some cases, training programs provided by state or regional agencies are linked to university programs so that teachers can get partial credit toward certification.
3. Support for the coaches is ongoing. Within the single-district examples (Stafford and Boston), the district holds regular meetings for the coaches to provide training and support. In the larger projects (Alabama Reading Initiative and the Reading Success Network), a system is established that allows meetings to be held among groups of coaches and principals from schools in the same region.
4. Coaches are seen as supporting, but not replacing, teacher knowledge. Content teachers are expected to attend professional development sessions to learn important theoretical and practical information about literacy processes and improvement. In many cases, this professional development is offered by the coaches through ongoing inquiry discussion groups for teachers in their own schools. A key component in the process is that teachers are included as experts in their own content areas; they team with the coach for more effective instruction. One-shot staff development programs without follow-up (which have been commonplace in many school districts) are avoided.
5. Funding sources are available. For all projects, funding is necessary to hire coaches and provide ongoing professional development and support for coaches, teachers, and administrators. The models require a long-term commitment, and concern about continuance of funding is common. For example, the Alabama initiative began with funding from both a business partner and the state. Currently, funding has shifted to the school districts with some state support. Budgetary concerns within the state have affected program expansion.

It would be impossible to list and describe them all, but the following examples provide a representative sampling of the variety of programs that are showing promising results in different areas of the country, utilizing different modes of implementation.

These programs demonstrate some of the many ways that literacy coaches are being effectively used to improve literacy teaching and learning. Although each is different, all initiatives share the ultimate goal of helping students to read at higher levels and comprehend the complex texts and other informational sources they need in order to graduate from high school prepared for college or a challenging job.

The Alabama Reading Initiative (statewide)

The Alabama Reading Initiative (ARI), which began in 1998, is a statewide K–12 initiative that currently includes voluntary participation by 132 middle schools and high schools throughout the state. The goal of ARI is to “significantly improve reading instruction and ultimately achieve 100% literacy among public school students” (Alabama Department of Education, 2003). This comprehensive program includes the goal of placing a literacy coach in every participating school. School faculties must vote (85 percent support is required) in order to join ARI. The Alabama Department of Education, in cooperation with colleges and universities in Alabama, provides ongoing training for all participants, including literacy coaches, teachers, and school administrators. Funding sources have included the state, business partnerships, and local districts.

Within the ARI project, literacy coaches are recruited from both within and outside of the participating schools. While some coaches are already certified literacy specialists, others are working toward their certification and can apply some of the training hours toward course credit in university courses (M. Spor, personal communication, September 5, 2003). All coaches must have an in-depth knowledge of literacy and writing processes as well as experience as teachers.

The role of the literacy specialist in ARI includes helping teachers learn new strategies, often by modeling. A dedicated specialist will take the lead in assuring that individual student assessment is done regularly and thoroughly. She or he will also bring a continuous stream of new ideas to the school faculty. Coaches are also seen as an integral part of the school leadership team.

Pam Duke, the education specialist responsible for secondary schools throughout Alabama, explained that a very important key to the program’s success is collaboration among teachers, principals, coaches, and the leadership from the state Department of Education. In addition, professional development is essential, required, and ongoing (P. Duke, personal communication, September 5, 2003).

The Alabama Reading Initiative has been evaluated on a continuing basis since its inception. According to a report completed in 2001, “on average, ARI schools outperform schools not in the ARI” (Moscovitch, 2001). However, the same report notes that some ARI schools performed much better than others. Ten key factors are cited as present in the higher-achieving schools. Among these factors are

- that “the school has a full-time reading specialist with in-depth, hands-on reading instruction experience,”
- that “teachers re-enforce comprehension skills for all students, not only in the language block or in language classes, but throughout the school day and across the entire curriculum,” and
- that the “principal is strongly committed to the reading initiative and knows how to provide educational leadership in the school.”

These findings are consistent with those of other programs, relating the importance of providing schools with a knowledgeable reading teacher who works in a coaching role with content area teachers. They also emphasize the important role of building leadership to support the literacy program.

Stafford County Public Schools, Virginia (district-wide, rural district)

The Stafford County Public Schools in Virginia are located in a rural area about forty miles from Washington, D.C. Over several years, the district's language arts supervisor, Dr. Nancy Guth, has lead an effort to place literacy coaches in schools at the secondary level. Currently, all eight middle schools have a full-time, state-certified reading specialist, who serves as a coach for middle school teachers and teacher teams. Dr. Guth explains that the literacy coaches are responsible for "modeling strategies, team teaching, meeting with teams of teachers" and other duties (N. Guth, personal communication, September 3, 2003).

Although data from the district's state assessments are still being analyzed, according to Dr. Guth preliminary results show that classes in which teachers have teamed with a literacy coach have shown "one to three years" more growth in a year than other classes.

Dr. Guth believes that a key element responsible for the success of the program is that it focuses in part on developing students' motivation and interest in reading. Students are given a choice of reading materials and then expected to do far more reading than they have done in the past. Teachers work on interdisciplinary teams, and the literacy coaches work with the entire team to infuse reading into the curriculum. This project is funded by the school district.

Boston Public Schools (district-wide, large city)

The Boston Public Schools enroll 62,400 students, including 18,300 in grades 9–12. Seventy-one percent qualify for free and reduced lunch. Over the past five years, BPS has "shown steady improvement in test scores" and sent increasingly more students to college (Jobs for the Future, July 7, 2003).

At least part of the improvement in Boston relates to the strong efforts that have been made in the area of literacy as part of the Boston Plan for Excellence. Literacy coaches are providing principals and teachers with "ongoing, in school, quality professional development that is focused on instruction."

The literacy coaches primarily "work with school staff on understanding and using workshop instruction, a district priority" (Boston Plan for Excellence). They also take part in inquiry groups of teacher teams, meet with principals, and model instruction in lab sites. Upon request, they follow up in teachers' classrooms ("modeling, observing, and co-teaching the strategy being studied in inquiry and the lab site").

The coaches include former teachers and principals, or doctoral students and adjunct professors from local universities. Some of these work part-time on contracts. Many other coaches are teachers who have been hired to work at their own or another school.

Within Boston, Fenway High School is an example of a school that has made great progress. This small school (270 students) has been recognized by the U.S. Department of Education as a New American High School. The school employs a full-time literacy coordinator who coteaches with core

subject area teachers to “incorporate literacy strategies and skills” in the content areas. The coordinator also teaches a “literacy foundations” course for all ninth graders in the school.

At Fenway, the literacy program is considered an important piece of the overall curriculum, which is designed to be “flexible” and “integrated” and promote “academic excellence and habits of the mind.” The school ranks consistently among top performers in the state among urban high schools on the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) English Language Arts Tests (U.S. Department of Education, 2003).

Reading Success Network, Southern California Comprehensive Assistance Center and WestEd

The Reading Success Network (RSN) provides a “national network of trainers who prepare teacher-coaches to support classroom teachers’ efforts to provide powerful instruction in reading.” It was designed by the Southern California Comprehensive Assistance Center (SCCAC) and includes five “fundamental components”: diagnosis, data analysis, intervention/prevention, coaching, and networking (WestEd, 2003).

Within this program, coaches and teachers participate in nine days of intensive professional development work related to analysis of data from their schools, and to “build the coaching conversations” that are important for success. Coaches then work in their own schools to support individual teachers and teams. They meet with teams, model, observe and discuss lessons, and help analyze student data. They also advise the principal on literacy-related issues.

Importantly, the RSN maintains an ongoing network of support for the coaches. It brings them together on a regular basis to discuss common issues and coaching strategies. Principals also participate in a series of professional development sessions and attend network meetings, as they are seen as key to the success of the program.

Literacy Instruction in Chicago High Schools

In August 2002, Chicago schools made improving the literacy skills of its high school students a district priority. Each high school created a literacy team, comprised of core subject teachers (one from each department), a special education teacher, and the school’s principal or assistant principal. Over the course of the academic year, these teams received a total of forty hours of professional development from literacy specialists. The professional development sessions include demonstrations of classroom strategies, small-group and individual mentoring/coaching sessions, assessment of student progress, and data interpretation. The Chicago Reading Initiative is scheduled to continue for the 2003 school year, with training for over 450 high school teachers to implement literacy in the four core subject areas.

Pathways for Becoming a School-Based Literacy Specialist

As these and other examples from across the United States indicate, districts, states, and regions that are implementing systemic reforms focused on literacy in middle and high schools are experiencing success. Literacy coaches are central to these models, because they can provide essential continuous staff development for teachers and school leaders, leadership for the literacy program of the school, and important links between the school and the overall district and state literacy efforts.

Yet the task of training and placing literacy coaches in all middle and high schools in the United States, or even in the schools with the most serious literacy needs, is daunting.

- First, the sheer number of coaches who will be needed is large. The Alliance for Excellent Education estimates that to meet the needs of the more than nine million fourth through twelfth graders who read below basic levels on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) exams, approximately ten thousand literacy coaches will be needed. While small schools might need only one literacy coach, many large urban schools would need far more in order to assign a coach to work with every twenty classroom teachers.
- Second, care must be taken not to sacrifice quality in the rush to locate a great number of coaches. Coaches must have or develop a very strong knowledge base in literacy theories and appropriate teaching strategies in order to serve as models and curriculum leaders. They must understand the adolescent learner, as well as the middle or high school context of teaching. Skills in program leadership and in working with other professionals are critical to the coach's effectiveness. Without all three qualities, literacy coaches are unlikely to be successful in helping to reform middle and high school education. They will not only lack the knowledge base to provide appropriate guidance and advice, but they will be unable to gain the respect of the teachers and administrators with whom they work.

Different, yet equally effective, pathways for teachers to become middle or high school literacy coaches have been developed by different programs. If the United States is to develop a large cadre of literacy coaches in the next few years, a multifaceted approach is necessary.

Many programs combine the resources of several different partners in the process. These partners may include states, universities and colleges, school districts, professional organizations and associations, and funding sources such as business partners or foundations. The federal government is another potential partner, particularly in serving the needs of students in high-poverty, high-needs schools.

The role of universities and colleges

In general, guidelines for many programs recommend that potential middle and high school literacy coaches come from the ranks of teachers already working at this level. For example, a secondary content teacher or specialist teacher (such as a learning disabilities teacher, an ESL teacher, or a speech pathologist working with middle and high school students) with a bachelor's or master's degree in his or her content field or specialty area would take a focused series of courses related to reading and writing processes and development, instructional strategies for middle and high school students, and strategies for mentoring and coaching other teachers. This coursework could lead to a master's

degree and/or teacher certification as a reading specialist, but would have a secondary school/coaching emphasis.

As an example of this model, George Mason University in Fairfax, Virginia, offers a twenty-one-credit-hour graduate program that is frequently taken by middle and high school teachers and specialists. As a state-approved program, these educators can become licensed as reading specialists with only the twenty-one hours related to literacy, if they already hold a master's degree. They can also earn a master's degree through additional coursework, if necessary. This option has made the program attractive to secondary teachers who already hold a master's in a content field or a specialty area, as well as those needing a master's degree. (Virginia requires a master's for certification as a reading specialist.) This type of program can also allow for collaboration between a school district or state and a university. Recently, for example, a large school district contracted with George Mason to offer the literacy specialization program specifically for teachers who wished to work at the middle school level. This cohort group focused primarily on working with students at that level, and participants completed their summer practicum in a highly diverse middle school.

University of Maine Preparing Teachers for Adolescent Literacy

The University of Maine is part of a partnership addressing the needs of adolescent learners. They offer a graduate-level course during the summer called the Adolescent Literacy Advanced Institute, designed to help subject matter teachers incorporate literacy instruction into their curriculum. Teachers who complete the institute, participate in four follow-up sessions, and successfully develop an action research project receive six graduate credits. These credits can be applied to the Master's in Literacy for Secondary Education degree offered at UMaine, which leads to a state certification as a Literacy Specialist.

The role of states

Additionally, states such as Alabama (noted earlier) have arranged for teachers who wish to become literacy coaches to take part of their coursework through state-organized workshops. Universities in the state collaborate in the project and accept a certain portion of this credit toward the teachers' master's programs.

No matter what path is taken to achieve certification as a literacy specialist, continuing professional development for literacy coaches is essential following certification and after they begin working in the school with teachers, administrators, and students.

States have a strong and longstanding responsibility in the area of teacher preparation. As noted earlier, most states require potential content area teachers to take at least one course, or the equivalent preparation, in content area literacy. Many also require preparation that includes the needs of students with disabilities and students for whom English is not the primary language. This is generally the limit of the literacy-related preparation of most middle and high school teachers. A few states (notably Maryland) have increased the required literacy-related preparation of secondary teachers, but generally not beyond two courses in reading.

The role of accreditation agencies

The certification and licensure of reading specialists is directly related to the issue of providing a sufficient literacy coaching force for schools, because reading specialists typically have the type of educational background that is most suited to the role. However, the landscape of state licensure and certification requirements for reading specialists (or “reading teachers” or “master reading teachers”) is highly complex and confusing.

- First, generally (but not always), this certification requires advanced work beyond the bachelor’s degree, usually a master’s degree at a college or university. A few states have permitted private corporations, state agencies, or testing corporations to take a strong role in licensure for reading specialists and other teachers. This is highly controversial, because of concerns about quality.
- Second, in terms of specific courses required or competencies addressed in graduate-level reading specialist preparation programs, colleges and universities follow the guidelines of their own states. While these can be widely varied, consistency across programs has begun to develop as many colleges and universities choose to follow the guidelines of the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE). NCATE uses the Standards for Literacy Professionals adopted by the International Reading Association (IRA) (1998; revised in 2003). In some states, these standards are used in lieu of specific state standards related to preparing reading specialists; in others, college and university programs must prove that they meet both the standards of their state and of NCATE. Additionally, other states and/or particular colleges and universities within states choose not to adopt NCATE standards and use only their own standards or those of another accrediting body.

Most programs that prepare individuals to become reading specialists accept only already licensed teachers with several years of experience as candidates for certification or licensure (generally called an “add-on” certificate). Historically, most reading specialist candidates, as well as those hired in schools, have been elementary teachers (with the notable exception of the historical period in the 1970s and 1980s mentioned earlier). Some districts, especially those with more available funding, have also provided one or a few reading specialists for their middle schools.

Within schools, the role of the reading specialist has in the past been primarily related to providing direct services to learners (as tutors or teachers of small groups), possibly to include release time to supervise a testing program or conduct an occasional teacher workshop. However, a resource, or coaching, role is now strongly advocated both by school districts and by accrediting agencies. For example, teachers who receive reading specialist teaching certificates in NCATE-accredited institutions now have to pass a series of performance-based assessments related to their ability to translate their knowledge of reading instruction into mentoring and staff development work with teachers (International Reading Association, 2000). The 1998 standards state that reading specialists should “serve as a resource in the area of literacy education for teachers, administrators, and the community,” as well as provide “leadership in literacy instruction and in professional development opportunities” (International Reading Association, 1998). The 2003 revision of the standards specifically require that reading specialist preparation programs assess reading specialists’ ability to work with other teachers as mentors and to provide guidance to teachers on all aspects of students’ literacy development and assessment.

As part of its work in developing guidelines for reading specialists’ preparation and work in schools, IRA also has developed a position statement related to the role of the reading specialist.

This statement advocates for a well-educated reading specialist in every school who has a coaching role: to “support, supplement, and extend” classroom instruction, provide a specialized knowledge of assessments and of students’ reading strengths and needs, and provide leadership for the school’s reading program as a “resource to other educators, parents, and the community” (International Reading Association, 2000).

What reading specialists actually do

Studies of actual reading specialists working in schools, though few in number, find that the reading specialist role is quite varied and often includes both a teaching and a coaching component. An interview study of high school reading specialists throughout the Commonwealth of Virginia, for example, found that all of the reading specialists in the study taught students for part of the day and that most also worked with other teachers. However, only three of the eleven teachers interviewed had written job descriptions, so the role was frequently renegotiated with school administrators (Darwin, 2002).

Other studies of reading specialists have also noted the importance of communication between a reading specialist and school administrators about the types of work the reading specialist should be doing to best serve the needs of the school. Yet this communication can be problematic. For example, Quatroche and her colleagues (Quatroche, Bean, and Hamilton, 2001) noted in a review of studies that “differences in how reading specialists perceive their roles versus how administrators view the specialists’ roles are apparent” (p. 285).

Overall, therefore, states that wish to provide literacy coaches for middle and high schools need to first consider their current requirements and policies related to reading specialists. Whatever type of professional training is provided to the literacy coach, it must take the reading specialist certification or license into account, since many reading specialists are currently beginning to adopt coaching roles, and their certification is (in many locations) changing to include advanced preparation in this role.

The role of collaboration

Historically, school districts and states have relied mostly on chance to provide the numbers of literacy specialists (or any other kind of teacher) they may need. Districts tend to wait until there are openings and advertise, hoping that enough certified teachers will apply. In times of teacher shortages, particularly for positions that are as unique as literacy coaches, this wait-and-see strategy is likely to backfire.

More recently, school districts have begun working collaboratively with colleges and universities to prepare the types of teachers who will meet the specific needs of students in their districts. For example, for preservice teachers, the Professional Development School (PDS) movement is growing. Teachers receive more of their preparation in field-based sites, and studies are beginning to show that such teachers stay in teaching longer and also produce higher student achievement (e.g., Linek, Fleener, Fazio, Raine, and Klakamp, in press). PDS or field-based programs are developed collaboratively between school and university partners.

The preparation of literacy coaches can also benefit from strong collaborations of this type. Professionals in school districts and in individual schools need to play a vital role in selecting and preparing literacy coaches. They can provide prospective coaches with a strong and contextual understanding of learners, teachers, schools, and curriculum used in the district. Schools of education also fill a necessary role. Faculty members specializing in literacy typically hold doctoral degrees and can provide teachers with an understanding of the research base that supports, or does not support, the confusing array of literacy strategies and programs that currently exist. Teachers need to develop knowledge that blends the expertise of these different groups of professionals in order to become decisionmakers, leaders, and coaches of other teachers.

In the set of examples presented earlier, Dr. Nancy Guth, a school district supervisor in Virginia, was described as being highly instrumental in advocating for reading specialists to work as coaches in her district's middle schools. Guth also provides the literacy coaches she hires with extensive onsite training. Guth notes that she requires all applicants to have reading specialist licenses from the state, and she has collaborated with a local university over a six-year time period to provide a program to prepare these specialists. The program, which meets state and NCATE requirements, serves the needs of districts in a large region of the state. Guth, who has a Ph.D. in literacy, teaches courses within the program, along with full-time university faculty and well-qualified literacy experts from throughout the region. Since she is located in a rural district about forty miles from the university, Guth also works collaboratively with supervisors in nearby districts to arrange the coursework at a site in their location so more rural teachers can participate.

This model, in which the school division advocates for and supports the preparation of literacy coaches and also provides jobs for them, is used in locations all across the country. Some regions or states, especially those that have funding levels that allow them to hire large numbers of literacy coaches, face a situation in which it is not possible to locate enough state-certified reading specialists (as Guth did). For example, leaders in Alabama in the Alabama Reading Initiative designed a project that required a large number of literacy coaches in schools. However, at the time of this decision, Alabama certification requirements did not include a state certification for a reading specialist, so few teachers with this preparation were available.

Leaders in Alabama at the state level then developed (with the assistance of university- and school-based literacy experts in Alabama) professional development programs to prepare highly experienced, well-regarded middle and high school teachers to become literacy coaches. The teachers began their work after completing a portion of their preparation, and they made commitments to continue their preparation into several school years. Later, when the state adopted criteria to certify reading specialists, the coaches were able to apply some of their coaching preparation hours to courses at colleges and universities across the state. This program also included collaboration with business partners who funded some of the initial components of the reading initiative. Alabama's collaborative design 1) enabled the state to attract middle and high school teachers into an area of study (literacy) that has traditionally been the province of elementary teachers, and 2) provided for a strong partnership between the state, local districts, colleges and universities, and businesses. Unfortunately, leaders in Alabama are now concerned that their program might have to be cut back, since the state faces a large budget shortfall that is likely to result in significant cuts to this program and other items in the education budget. Record state-level deficits across the nation are causing similar cuts to almost all education budgets.

Next Steps

The literacy of America's youth is too important to leave to chance. But school district resources, especially in high-poverty areas, are very limited.

The federal government has recognized its role in funding literacy programs designed to impact children in grades K–3, implementing the Reading First program as an integral component of the recently enacted No Child Left Behind Act. An expansion of that program to provide targeted, federal level funding of adolescent literacy programs is now needed. This expansion should allow states and districts to provide literacy coaches to all high-needs middle and high schools.

This effort must include resources to support

1. The development of collaborative relationships and partnerships between state Departments of Education, school districts, colleges and universities, professional organizations, foundations, nonprofit organizations, and businesses.
2. Recruitment of highly regarded middle and high school teachers who will commit themselves to preparing for and engaging in this essential role over at least a five-year time period.
3. Funding of high-quality coursework that meets the standards of national organizations for the preparation of literacy professionals. This should include funding for colleges and universities to work collaboratively with school districts to develop initial preparation and continuing professional development for literacy coaches. Preparation should provide a strong background in theory and evidence-based practices as well as a deep understanding of the needs of local schools and learners.
4. Funding for research and evaluation related to this effort, to include a focus on both the successes and difficulties experienced by schools and districts that implement a literacy coaching model. Necessary areas of research include a) the potential benefits for student literacy growth as well as increased learning across the curriculum; b) the potential benefits for content area teachers' professional development, including an analysis of constraints under which teachers operate on a day-to-day basis that may negatively impact instruction; c) program designs that facilitate literacy coach retention and professional development; d) program designs that involve administrators, teachers, students, families, and the community to promote a whole-school focus on literacy and learning improvement for middle and secondary students; and e) the impact of school, district, state, and federal policies on the instructional decisions of teachers related to teaching literacy within their content instruction. Research designs that simultaneously explore multiple aspects of the literacy coaching model as part of an all-school (or district) effort toward curricular change are especially needed, since secondary school cultures have often been found to be resistant to change in the past (e.g., Cuban, 1993). The literacy coaching model may offer great potential for long-lasting school change because it represents a means of providing continuous professional development for teachers that is situated within their own environments. Yet given the potentially vast differences in ways this model might be implemented (or cut back, when funds are short), *a rigorous program of research and evaluation is necessary to identify the most essential features shared by effective models.*

The Alliance for Excellent Education's Adolescent Literacy Initiative

Research shows that students who receive intensive, focused literacy instruction and tutoring graduate from high school in significantly greater numbers than those not receiving such attention. Despite these findings, few middle or high schools have a comprehensive approach to teaching literacy across the curriculum.

The Alliance calls for Congress and the president to strengthen and expand the Reading First program, which currently supports literacy in early grades, by adding an Adolescent Literacy Initiative to its mission. Under the new initiative, every high-needs middle and high school would have a literacy specialist who trains teachers across subject areas to improve the reading and writing skills of all students. In addition, teachers would learn to identify reading difficulties and could ensure that students receive the extra help they need to become effective readers and writers.

Legislation should specify the types of training and education required, as the literacy specialist needs a depth of knowledge in literacy, adolescence, and teacher development. It is important to note that across the country, many programs for early literacy are starting to use literacy coaches as part of professional development funding through Reading First grants. The reasoning behind this type of funding could also be applied to the middle and high school levels.

State Departments of Education should be encouraged to use their current programs to prepare reading specialists, with modification to fully meet the needs of both literacy specialists who will work with middle and high school populations, rather than at the elementary level. Literacy specialists should work primarily as coaches for teachers and leaders in school buildings, rather than as tutors for individuals or small groups.

On a national level, it is recommended that the conversation about literacy at the middle and high school levels include a wide range of groups, such as literacy-related organizations, organizations representing teachers of exceptional children or English learners, organizations of content area educators (such as in social studies, mathematics, and so on) and organizations of school leaders. The conversation must also go beyond the education community to include stakeholders at all levels, such as families, policymakers, business leaders, and the community as a whole.

The literacy development of American adolescents must become a serious national priority. Today, many schools are not meeting a fundamental mission—teaching students to read, write, and think critically enough to succeed in challenging high school coursework and graduate prepared for college. Research shows that students need expert teachers who engage students while weaving literacy instruction into core subjects. However, most secondary school teachers are not well qualified to teach literacy skills. Of the few who are qualified, many are wrestling with the colossal task of teaching content in their subject areas and do not see literacy instruction as their priority.

One strategy that states and districts are using to provide professional development to content area teachers is the use of literacy coaches. Through various pathways, our nation can ensure that enough literacy coaches are prepared to meet the needs of our teachers and students in our neediest secondary schools. Their future, and the future of the nation, are dependent on it.

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